

*In 1994 a church announced it would sell a 2.2 hectare cemetery to developers. After years of anguish for relatives, the bulldozers have moved in to dig up the remains of 9,500 bodies. But, before the engines have cooled down at the end of each day, grave robbers are moving in to steal the gravestones. Respect? What respect?*



This picture of the Angel was taken a few weeks before vandals tried to decapitate her.

## **HOW TO TURN A CEMETERY INTO A DEVELOPMENT**

- 1982 Graveyard closed to new burials.
- December 1994 Church announces it intends to sell the cemetery.
- 19 January 1995 Public meeting in Claremont Town Hall. 200 attend.
- January 1995 National Monuments Council provisionally declares the cemetery a national monument, thus putting the development process on hold for six months.
- March 1996 Original developer, Alfron Property Investments, pulls out.
- September 1996 Cape Metropolitan Council announces that all 17 graveyards under the control of the CIVIC are running at 'an enormous loss,' and most are more than 70 per cent full, necessitating the future recycling of graves.
- October 1996 Second developer, Anlink, with Owen Kinahan as 'facilitator', proposes Garden of Remembrance on site. Trust formed to administer the Garden of Remembrance.
- 23 April 1997 Exhumation begins.
- August 1997 Security guard placed on site at night.

It's nine o'clock on a Friday night in St Peter's cemetery, Mowbray. The moon hangs like a fat, silver carp over the tangled Keiapple hedge planted more than 100 years ago to keep wandering cattle from the juicy grass and the flowers left by mourners.

The path that climbs up from the gateway on the main road starts as an uneven strip of tar, then, without warning, becomes a creeping, Somme-like field of mud that widens every day as the graves give up their contents to the bulldozers and front-end loaders that are clearing the space for townhouses, offices and shops. This mud can suck your leg in up to the knee and pull your shoe off to join the wet fragments of wood, bone, jewellery or dentalwork that, having survived the ravages of more than a century underground, may also have escaped the exhumers' keen eye.

Toting my camera bag and tripod, I climb off the path onto a large family slab - the monument lies shattered to one side - and slowly pick my way between the graves, aiming

at the moonlit figure of an angel that towers above the other stones.

About 400 metres away, on the south side of the cemetery, a car turns into the access-road that bisects the site. Its headlights remain on for a few seconds, then flick off; but it keeps moving right up the road to stop within 50 metres of where I'm crouched behind a headstone. A door slams and a low voice says, 'C'mon, there's no one here!' The other door slams, and I hear them cursing their way across the mud to where the graves begin. They know what they're after, because within a few minutes there's a loud crack and I see two crouching shapes flash-silhouetted by the kind of spark that metal makes when it bites into stone.

'Hey!' I shout.

Despite the fact that their car is parked right there, they decide on the baby buck approach: freeze until the threat goes away. I make my way noisily over to where I saw the spark, and say: 'You might as well come out.'



Much of the statutory was vandalised before development began.

After running through the full gamut of guilty-escape techniques, which range from indignantly asking me what I'm doing there, to protestations of innocence and then, finally - once they ascertain that I'm not going to turn them in - to contrition, I discover that they're two men with jobs and homes (one is married) who've decided that it might be nice to pick up a couple of souvenirs.

'Do you realise that what you're actually doing is robbing graves?' I ask. 'All this stuff is just going to be destroyed anyway,' one says, 'I guarantee it'll get more respect on our mantlepieces than if it gets tossed on a dump somewhere!'

'We're not stealing,' the other assures me. 'When I was at varsity, the guys at art school used to go to the cemeteries and steal all the old Victorian cut-glass from the graves. They cleaned it up and sold it to antique dealers, at like a hundred bucks a time - that was stealing! But this whole place is being smashed down anyway, so what harm are we doing?' He ges-

tures with his hammer towards the white marble angel lying in the long grass, whose head they were attempting to sever. Almost as though, in the light of this reasonable explanation, he expects me to allow them to continue.

I explain that all the remains and the headstones are to be re-interred in an ossuary (a 15 x 15 metre concrete pit) and that the historically valued monuments, of which 'their' angel is part, will be retained and placed all around this to form a Garden of Remembrance. They mutter their apologies and turn to go.

'Why not take the whole thing?' I ask. 'Why just chop off the head?'

'Have you felt how heavy it is?' They reply in unison.

As the sound of the retreating car fades, the noise of a bottle clinking against something hard rings out, followed by a woman's laugh, and, feeling more threatened by the living than the thought of anything the dead or their spirits can muster, I decide to go home.



The Ossary. All stones, except the two to three hundred that are historically important, will be interred here along with the remains.



It has been mooted that this pile of coffinwood be burnt at Halloween.

The saga of St Peter's began in December 1994, when its Mowbray Church of England parish placed a notice in the newspapers informing the public of the imminent sale of the 2,2 hectare cemetery to a developer. Included in the announcement was the proposed removal of the 3,000 monuments, and the exhumation, cremation and mass burial - on St Peter's church premises - of the 9,500 sets of remains. At this point the church stated it was to use the R2-million, which the land was expected to fetch, to purchase a block of flats to house homeless members of the St Peter's parish.

At the forefront of the public outcry this announcement caused was Owen Kinahan. An urban conservationist and member of the Historical Society of Cape Town, Kinahan was elected City councillor in 1996 for the ward in which the cemetery lies.

Rosy-cheeked and bearded, he strings words into flawless sentences, delivered in a voice any parson would be proud to raise in prayer. I meet with him on a Thursday morning in August,

about three months into the exhumation process. Having read his letters which have appeared in the newspapers ('We can't treat our dead like this,' 'Money from those dead will be lost on the living,' 'St Peter's: Legal issues must be settled quickly,'), I'm a little taken aback to hear that he wants me to emphasise the positive aspects of the development.

'One of the touch-stones that got me involved in this whole thing is that this is practically the last opportunity for us to come up with a benchmark for the redevelopment of old graveyards.' He tells me earnestly. 'This has been happening for years - the demise of our urban graveyards, that is. It began with the removal of the Somerset Road cemetery a century ago, at which time there was no sympathy whatsoever. Remains were merely exhumed and put into the Woltemade cemetery, while the gravestones were laid face-down as paving stones for visitors to walk on. We're talking about some of the giants of 18th century Cape history - gone! People like the Schuttes, the Anreiths and the

Thibaults. Another example was St Thomas's in Rondebosch - now one of Bishop's school rugby fields - that has no memorial at all.

'But the last big controversial one was Wynberg, where the Dutch Reformed Church sold off about a third of the site, and the first the public heard about it was when the bulldozers moved in and people were suddenly faced with bits of coffin and bone and demolished monuments. Despite the controversy about the way it was handled, that graveyard has been, to coin a phrase, given a whole new lease on life. It's much more pleasant, safer and better to look at, and it's added an extra century to the place.

'So we had to look at this one, and acknowledge, for various reasons, that things couldn't go on as they were, and then ask what we could best do to take the cemetery into the next century as an example for the redevelopment of future urban graveyards. There are lots of things I'm not happy with, and I've no doubt that even over the course of the next three or four graveyards, these mistakes will still be

made, but at least in future we can say: well this is what we did, now how can it be improved upon?'

According to Desmond Martin of the National Monuments Council, the church had undeniably, in the face of numerous letters of censure from the NMC, allowed the decay of St Peter's graveyard to occur. It had become a place where thigh-thick wattle trees (never mind the thigh-high weeds) grew on graves; where vagrants lived in plastic and cardboard shelters supported by gravestones and metalwork, scattering their extensive 'wardrobes', litter and faeces all about.

I tell Kinahan that an elderly, indignant man I talked to while front-end loaders scratched in a particularly low lying - and thus wet - part of the cemetery for his parents' remains, had accused the church of wilfully allowing the cemetery to fall into this state. 'It's exactly the same all over Cape Town,' the old man said. 'If you have a structure that is old enough to be a National





Men at work. Some of the stones weigh over 500kg.



Exhumation in the 'wet' part of the cemetery proceeds behind the tombstone and monument dated 1905 on the grave of Sophia Theresia Henrietta Lithman.



The final stages of exhumation in the dry part of the cemetery are carried out manually, whereas in the wet part, front-end loaders perform the entire operation.

Monument and want to replace it with a high-rise, you just move out and let the bergies do the rest. Within a few years it'll be a burntout health risk, and you'll be given permission to demolish it and build your high-rise. The church has been exploring the possibility of selling this land for years, so, despite the fact that people were still paying maintenance on

family plots, they gave up on any attempts at preservation a long time ago!" Eventually the smell that accompanies a 'wet' exhumation, and the realisation that all that was left of his parents was a dark scoop of mud in which only a few shards of bone and coffin-wood remained, proved to be too much for him, and he rushed, ashen faced, from the site.

'From the outset the church has demonstrated a singular lack of leadership, comfort or direction in this matter,' says Kinahan.

'When you are running a maintenance fund, and are still taking money from people, you have an obligation to keep the place up, so yes, there is a definite feeling that the church didn't try hard enough. A lot of people paid for "Maintenance in Perpetuity" - which means only one thing! Others were still paying a maintenance fee in 1994, and wanted to know what the church was doing with the money they had in their kitty (A figure he has estimated to be R49 000.) Initially there was some doubt as to the legality of what the church wanted to do, because the perception

was that people had bought a plot, where actually all they had done was purchase the right to be buried on the land. But even this was not clear-cut - there was a great deal of conflict with the receipts that were produced, because the full range was there - from outright purchase to perpetual maintenance. Some were altered by hand; others weren't cosigned. It was a disaster!

'What it boils down to is that the land belongs to the church, so they can do what they like with it.'

In response, the church claims that since the church realised, about 14 years ago, that maintenance of the cemetery - given the limited funds coming in - was becoming problematic, it tried, more than once, to hand the site over to the Divisional and City Councils. Both declined to accept responsibility for it.

'Look, we've done the best we can,' asserts church spokesman Kenneth Brown, People's Warden.

'We sprayed herbicidal sprays to kill the grass, had all the bushes cut down, and even had a company mowing the place in sections, but the vagrants stayed, and the vandalism continued. Any flowers and vases left by people were stolen and sold. Eventually, all we could do was put portable latrines in, so that at least there wouldn't be faeces all over the place, but even that didn't work.'

He declines to confirm or deny that there was R49 000 in the cemetery kitty, but acknowledges R20 000 went towards notification of surviving relatives, demolishing the caretaker's house and researching and photographing all the monuments on the site. As to why this money had not been previously spent to maintain the graveyard, he says: 'We knew that we would just be faced with the same problem again in 10 years' time!'

The construction of the Garden of Remembrance on site, a solution facilitated by Kinahan, was arrived at after months of public meetings, discussions between the developers, The National Monuments Council, the city and the church, and much letter writing from all sides. Amid strong public feeling that the church should not profit from the sale, the church agreed to fund the cataloguing of the headstones, thereby assisting the genealogical society to compile a register of St Peter's dead so that their names can be inscribed on a cenotaph in the future Garden. It was also agreed that a trust would be formed to administer the maintenance of the Garden in perpetuity. Initially both Kinahan and Brown were members of the Garden of Remembrance Trust.

Now that the process is irrevocably underway, Kinahan claims the church has changed the rules. It is asking to be refunded for the research it paid for and has rejected the idea of the Garden Trust administering the R250 000

generated by the sale of the cemetery, a move which has effectively left the Trust without any funds.

Following this announcement, other members of the Garden Trust accused Brown of having a conflict of interest and of taking the money 'deceitfully' and he resigned from the trust. 'The church,' he says, 'has run the cemetery for 154 years, and, through no fault of ours, it has just become too difficult to continue doing so. We were accused of incompetence, and that was why they insisted that the [Garden] Trust should be independent of the church. They got their wish, and now they must do their job! First they must see that its all done properly and then make sure the developer looks after the Garden. I can't see why they need money if the developer is maintaining the Garden in perpetuity.'

When I mention Kinahan once too often he says: 'He's a politician. He has made a name for himself on this issue, that's why he's a councillor now'

The one thing Kinahan and Brown agree on, though, is that the Garden is going to be a lovely, pretty place; a place, according to Brown, 'where people can rest and have a sandwich.'

Keith Cowling, a partner in Anlink, the developer, puts the conflict between the church and the Garden Trust in perspective: 'Fundamental to any meeting that we've ever held has been the premise that the church would not profit from this. Two of the church council members were Garden trustees, so we assumed that there was a common interest. All of a sudden this "we/they" thing happened and the church decided they were going to control the money, and donate it to good causes of their own choice. The Trust is concerned because if something happens to the eventual owner or the developer, and they, or we, stop maintaining the garden, then it would be nice to have; and we're concerned because morally, the money shouldn't go to another cause, no matter how good it is!'

Cowling freely admits that Anlink has made mistakes along the way, but says: 'None of us can draw on any previous experience here, we're learning as we go. Many of the undertakings we made initially have proven impractical and they've had to be reviewed, but Owen Kinahan has clobbered us every time we made a mistake, and then we've sorted it out.'

Anlink's list of undertakings regarding exhumation falls into the 'impractical' category and has been revised to everyone's satisfaction, but the most worrying contravention has been the lack of a meaningful security presence for the first three months of the exhumation process. This despite the fact that Kinahan has been calling for it since early 1995.

'It is a problem,' concedes Cowling. 'A stupid oversight on my behalf was not to put up "Keep Out" signs right in the beginning. But we only took transfer of the property eight weeks ago, and until that point, security was not strictly our responsibility.'

'I think we need to point out to people that this process is taking us towards a better - dignified and manageable - St Peter's'

While taking photographs one Wednesday morning, I meet Kevin van Heerden, whose grandparents, uncle and mother are all buried here. He is outraged at the theft and vandalism that he's witnessed since the process began. He takes me over to a central area where stones have been stacked in jumbled piles.

'Last week there were three small Coptic crosses, and lots of other plain ones - all gone! I reckon half of Cape Town has taken something from here' It turns out that he's waiting for the undertakers to unseat his grandparent's monument which he's going to take home to place in his garden.

'My mom just had a cement slab, and even this one isn't fancy, but I'd rather have it than see it buried with all the others.'

Did you come to visit the graves often I ask.

'No, never, I must admit... look, in principle, I'm not against what they're doing here. I don't believe that a dead person should be able to lay claim to a patch of ground forever, it's just the way they're going about it that rankles.'

We're joined by a middle-aged woman who has overheard my question and Van Heerden's reply. She asks not to be named, and says: 'I also have relatives here, but as far as I'm concerned they are now one with the earth. The memories that I have of them are enough for me. What makes me laugh is how upset some of the other descendants have allowed themselves to become over this whole thing. Why didn't they do something when they saw how decrepit, the cemetery had become? I'll tell you why, because most of them never came here. If you ever go to England, visit an old graveyard there and you'll realise, when you see how well-tended and lovely it is, that we South Africans are an apathetic bunch: Kevin nods reflectively.

Undertaker Stuart Jewell who, together with his father, Roy, is supervising the exhumations,

shrugs when I mention some of the concerns raised by Van Heerden.

'Look, security has got nothing to do with us,' he tells me. 'The developers have employed Fidelity to look after the place, but this is a dangerous place, and the size of it, and all the mud makes it a very difficult job: He's reluctant to talk on the record about exhumation procedures, but admits that having to pull so many bodies out of the ground is morally not a pleasant task. In fact all the workers that I speak to on site demonstrate the same down-eyed unease when questioned about their personal views.

One, an out of work butcher employed for the duration of this contract only, sums up his position by saying: 'Ja, I feel terrible having to do this, but its money, and these days if you can make a buck you've got to go for it!'

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